



Resource Extractivism, ‘Resource Curse’ and Mining Catastrophe in Hari Kurissery’s *Manalazham*

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Abstract— The historical roots of resource extractivism can be traced back to the colonial times when various European powers had ceaselessly plundered the human resources, predominantly in the form of slaves, and natural resources like minerals, gold, diamond, ivory, and wood mainly from the African and Asian countries, and brought them to their native lands in order to accelerate the growth of the Industrial Revolution. Extractivism, as defined by Naomi Klein in the book *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate* (2014), connotes “a nonreciprocal, dominance-based relationship with the earth, one purely of taking” (Klein, 2014, p.168). She, further, adds that extractivism is “directly connected to the notion of sacrifice zones- places that, to their extractors, somehow don’t count and therefore can be poisoned, drained, or otherwise destroyed” (Klein, 2014, p.169). However, the couple of terms – “resource extractivism” and “resource curse” are closely linked, and the latter can be unequivocally called an inevitable byproduct of the former. The term “resource curse”, as theorized by Richard M. Auty in his highly acclaimed work, *Sustaining Development in Mineral Economics: The Resource Curse Thesis* (1993), refers to the “problem of plenty”/ “paradox of plenty”, which foregrounds that “the countries that are rich in natural resources, and whose economy is based primarily on extracting and exporting those resources, find it more difficult to develop” (Lang et al., 2013, p.61). However, in my research paper, I shall closely examine the renowned Malayalam journalist cum writer Hari Kurissery’s novel *Manalazham* (2015), translated into English by Santosh Alex in 2021 as *Sandy Depth*, through the theoretical framework of resource extractivism and “resource curse”, as they largely fit into the context of the unbridled and illegal sand excavation from agricultural fields, the thoughtless destruction of hills in the name of road construction, and the ever increasing level of air pollution owing to open brick kilns in the imaginary village called Mannida located in the present-day state of Kerala, as depicted in the novel.



Keywords— *Manalazham*, mining catastrophe, neo-colonialism, Resource extractivism, resource curse.

I. INTRODUCTION

They say that we have come to this earth to destroy the world. They say...that we devour everything, we consume the earth.

—Girolamo Benzoni, *History of the New World* (quoted in Amitav Ghosh’s *The Nutmeg’s Curse*, 2021)

In the third world countries, like India, the impact of colonization, as a functional devise of imperialism, is extremely profound and all pervasive, even in the 21st century. In fact, a new form of colonialism, rather an

extension, which “represents imperialism in its final and perhaps its most dangerous stage” (Nkrumah, 1965, p. 4), has emerged in the post-colonial countries in the name of ‘neo-colonialism’, a term coined by Kwame Nkrumah, the first President of Ghana and chief exponent of pan-Africanism, in his famous book, *Neo-Colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism* (1965). The term, ‘neo-colonialism’, suggests that despite gaining political freedom by the formerly colonized countries, “the ex-colonial powers and the newly emerging superpowers such as the United States continued to play a decisive role in their cultures and

economies through new instruments of indirect control, such as international monetary bodies, through the power of multinational corporations and cartels which artificially fixed the prices in world markets, and through a variety of other educational and cultural non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (Ashcroft et al., 2025, pp.236-237). Perhaps, the most recurrent and debated term, pertaining to both colonialism and neo-colonialism, is resource extractivism or simply, "extractivism" (a term coined by the Uruguayan social scientist Eduardo Gudynas), which refers to "those activities which remove large quantities of natural resources that are not processed (or processed only to a limited degree), especially for export" (Lang et al. 2013, p.61). Although, resource extraction had set in long back in the colonial times with the large-scale plundering and exporting of human resources in the form of slaves, and natural resources in the form of minerals, gold, diamond, ivory, and sylvan resources like cotton and woods from the colonized countries of Asia and Africa to the homelands of the European colonizers, as a neo-colonial enterprise, it came into being much later in the 20th century. In this capital driven world, the neo-colonialist powers excessively indulge in various extractivist activities, like crude oil extraction, and ore and coal mining, in the resource-rich underdeveloped nations for illimited profit. And, in course of time, other natural objects like land, water, and river sand are also robbed of in this colossal exploitative mission, thus, immediately and directly affecting the lives of the 'ecosystem people', who are from "those communities which depend very heavily on the natural resources of their own locality- against 'omnivores', individuals and groups with the social power to capture, transform and use natural resources from a much wider catchment area; sometimes, indeed, the whole world" (Guha and Martinez-Alier, 1997, p.12). Thus, to these vulnerable people, this very nature's bounty, ultimately, turns out to be a "resource curse", a term coined by Richard M. Auty in *The Sustaining Development in Mineral Economics: The Resource Curse Thesis* (1993), which advocates that "not only may resource-rich countries fail to benefit from a favourable endowment, they may actually perform worse than less well-endowed countries" (Auty, 1993, p.1). The actual cause of "the resource curse", often known as "the paradox of plenty"/ "the problem of plenty", is further addressed by Albert Acosta as he posits that "most of what is produced by the extractivist industries is not for consumption in the domestic market but basically destined for export" (Lang et al., 2013, p.63). In this fashion, the resource-endowed countries are deprived of their own riches and compelled to embrace sheer poverty by the extractivist forces like multinational organizations, both governmental and non-governmental, and the leading economies like the USA, China, and Japan. In this regard,

we are, at once, reminded of the US president Donald Trump's recent implementation of his aggressive global mantra "drill, baby, drill" by dramatically capturing Nicolás Maduro, and asserting dominion over Venezuela's vast oil reserves. As Trump said, reported on 6th January, 2026 in *The Guardian* by Noor and Milman, "The oil companies are going to go in, they are going to spend money, we are going to take back the oil, frankly, we should've taken back a long time ago. A lot of money is coming out of the ground; we are going to be reimbursed for everything we spend." In this very context of severe neo-colonialist and neo-imperialist domination, the Indian-born journalist and writer Hari Kurissery's Malayalam environmental novel *Manalazham* (2015), translated into English as *Sandy Depth* (2021) by Santosh Alex, that showcases a vibrant gallery of horrifying images of rampant sand extraction, calls for a close consideration. Unlike the common practice of sand excavation from rivers, the novel exclusively deals with the theme of unbridled illegal sand mining from agricultural wetlands, through the formation of countless deep sand pits. Consequently, numerous deaths occur owing to sudden exposure to these deadly pits. It also engages with the theme of loss of rare medicinal plants and fertility of cultivating lands, located in Mannida and its immediate vicinity, in the present-day state of Kerala. The novel also sheds light on other ecological concerns such as the levelling of hills by soil mining under the garb of road construction and the local people suffering from various respiratory problems caused by air pollution from open brick furnace, followed by a number of environmental protests. Thus, the novel vividly shows how despite being replete with natural resources, Mannida is destined to undergo the "resource curse" in the form of underdevelopment.

II. "THERE'S NOTHING TO INVEST, IT'S JUST SCOOPING AND COLLECTING THE SAND": MAPPING RESOURCE EXTRACTIVISM AS A NEO-COLONIAL ENTERPRISE IN MANALAZHAM

Resource extractivism as a neo-colonial venture is a dominant discourse in Hari Kurissery's eco-fiction *Manalazham*. In the very opening chapter of the novel, titled "Reptile", we get a glimpse, for the first time, of the unlawful and unrestrained sand extraction, when the novel's protagonist, Sachidanandan, a disabled person, coming to the village Mannida to serve as a guest teacher of Sanskrit at the Nelpara School, is guided at Kalarimukku by "the water drops that fell from the sand lorry showed the way to Mannida" (Kurissery, 2021, p.10). The large-scale sand extraction from the river Kallada had earlier increased the river's depth to such an extent that "even if the dam

explodes and the water flows into the river, it can hold the water" (Kurissery, 2021, p.26), thus preventing the river from flooding and rendering the agricultural lands, situated by the river banks, infertile. As Radhakrishnan, an environmental activist of Mannida and Sachidanandan's companion, gives a detailed account:

Every time the older generation waited for the fertile soil to be deposited on the banks of the river...When there was no fertile soil people started new ways of cultivation. Salt deposits occurred on the land. They lost their way of cultivation. (Kurissery, 2021, p.26)

Thus, the Mannida people had gradually shifted their daily labour from the agricultural fields to the brick backing areas and later on to the sand excavating agricultural wetlands.

This massive transition leads to an unimaginable increase in the price of lands, and gives birth to a sudden rise of a number of sand dealers or contractors like Chandran Pillai, Bennichan, Rameshan, and Raghavan, who act as neo-colonial agents through largely operating their extractivist ventures by purchasing people's lands, and hiring the local people, and employing them in sand mining as per their individual skill:

There are so many contractors. The fields which were not worth rupees five hundred for a cent were bought for five thousand or twelve thousand rupees. Then they make lakhs of rupees. There's payment for everything, those who show the way for the lorry, those who check the employee, the one who shows the route is provided with a mobile, bike and cash, the one who ferries the boat, the one who scoops the sand, motor mechanic, lorry owner, tea shop person, lottery person and the woman who spends the night with those coming with money. There's money everywhere. (Kurissery, 2021, p.27)

In addition, the overwhelming presence of tipper lorries, plying on the roads and carrying loads of excavated sand at a very rapid speed, terrifies the villagers and even bus drivers who immediately make way for them. In order to put an end to this alarming situation, Sachi reports to the district collector, and informs several local newspapers. Along with the villagers and the other members of Mannida Protection Committee, Sachi puts up a number of protests against the illegal sand mining claiming it as the root cause of all the troubles, only to find that everyone, ranging from the police, the administrative officials to the political leaders, and ministers, is in close liaison with the sand mafias. When the district collector informs the leader of the ruling party about the environmental issues looming large in Mannida, the leader draws a parallel between the sand mining Mannida

and the oil extracting Saudi Arabia, and declares the very practice of sand mining as a way to becoming "self-sufficient":

In Arab countries they are mining oil from the land ... What's wrong in mining sand from the land, which is for the growth of the village. The village is standing on its own. It's becoming self-sufficient. Mahatma Gandhi too said to be self-sufficient...It's like petro dollar. Have you heard of environmental problems in Arab Countries? (Kurissery, 2021, p.92)

This very remark of the leader not only unveils his neo-colonial extractivist mindset but also justifies Naomi Klein's definition of extractivism as "a non-reciprocal, dominance-based relationship with the earth, one purely of taking" (Klein, 2014, p.195).

The novel effortlessly shows how the agricultural lands as an integral part of the earth are colonized, and reduced to a mere commodity "for the use of the others, giving them no integrity or value of their own..." (Klein, 2014, p.195):

Children told that huge motor is used for sucking the sand from depths. A big hose is dropped in water. It would go down till the bed and do the dredging. Sand, water, and mud would suck through the hose. The other end mud goes out along with water. (Kurissery, 2021, p.36)

The lines staunchly display how the inhabitants of Mannida including the extractors look upon this nature's plenty as mere sources of income by totally denying its existential essence. It instantly reminds us of the important observation made by the historian William Cronon that "European perception of what constituted a proper use of the environment...thus became a European ideology of conquest" (Ghosh, 2021, p.71).

III. "MANNIDA IS A PLACE WHICH LIVES BY SELLING ITSELF": READING MANALAZHAM IN THE LIGHT OF "RESOURCE CURSE"

Located on the banks of the river Kallada, Mannida is blessed with natural resources like topsoil, golden sand, and good quality mud. In spite of having such plenty, the village does not have a sustainable economic growth. This is a clear case of "resource-curse", which indicates such a paradoxical situation in which the abundance of natural assets of a resource-rich country or locale ultimately proves to be a curse to its development. The likes of Chandran Pillai, Bennichan, Rameshan, and Sudhakaran, who are largely instrumental in extensive sand mining from agricultural fields, export the extracted sand to the other

states and earn huge profit. The people of Mannida who are engaged in sand mining as daily labourers are also paid handsome wages. Despite such monetary gain, they suffer from an acute financial crisis, owing to a lavish life-style. Whatever they earn, they spend extravagantly and mostly in consumption of alcohol. Thus, going bankrupt, these people even have to take loan from the co-operative bank and pay the amount back along with huge interest. On the other hand, the owners reap the maximum profit out of it. As Radhakrishnan aptly points it out in a conversation with Sachidanandan:

Sir, the income of the most of the people of Mannida are double than the outside people. It's like the UGC salary. There are people who don't sweat and make money by informing the number of lorries plying here. The income is lost in many ways here. The main way is that of liquor, prostitutes, hotels, lotteries and hospitals. (Kurissery, 2012, p.97)

Going bankrupt, these people even have to take loan from the co-operative bank and pay the amount back along with huge interest. When the government come in their aid in terms of providing rice at low price, free education in the school, and various study materials free of cost, the shop owners reap the maximum profit out of these too. As Radhakrishnan describes:

If the poor people don't buy rice for rupees one a kilo, it is sold at rupees nine and thirty-five rupees a kilo in the black market. Also, they make money from the sales of liquor and lottery. Also, they make money from the medicines too. (Kurissery, 2021, p.97)

On the other hand, those who neither work for the contractors, nor possess a substantial plot of land which they can sell for mining, have to suffer also, for their land is no longer suitable for cultivation. Thus, this bidimensional disadvantage keeps the ultimate financial prospect of Mannida ever at bay, validating Richard M. Auty's idea of "resource curse", rephrased by Alberto Acosta that "countries that are rich in natural resources, with economies mostly based on the extraction and export of these resources, find it more difficult to ensure the well-being of their citizens" (Vivares, 2020, p.391).

IV. "THERE IS A SERIOUS ENVIRONMENTAL PROBLEM IN MANNIDA": REPRESENTATION OF MINING CATASTROPHE IN *MANALAZHAM*

As narrated in Kurissery's novel, the unbridled sand and clay mining from the cultivating lands of Mannida gives birth to a plethora of sand pits as deep as "the length of tall coconut tree" (Kurissery, 2021, p.26), which culminates in

the loss of a number of both human and non-human lives, due to accidental exposure. Apart from this, the novel also addresses diverse environmental concerns such as the demolition of buildings, loss of natural biodiversity in the form of herbal plants, destruction of hill, ravaging air pollution, water pollution and water scarcity. In the words of Sachidanandan:

The mountains have been destroyed, the fields have become pits, infants fall into these pits and have died, people have health problems because of the smoke emanating from the chimney... (Kurissery, 2021, p.119)

The heedless scooping of sand from the profound depth of soil by the sand extractors often leads to sudden demolition of buildings close to the mining sites, thus, rendering the lives of the Mannida people vulnerable. As the novel reads:

Many of the villagers didn't know that the motor situated in the faraway field was scooping sand under their home foundation. Within weeks their building walls and floor got cracks and after some months it collapsed. (Kurissery, 2021, p.36)

The novel, in its 17th Chapter titled "Desi Medicine" reflects on the destruction of natural biodiversity in the form of herbal plants, like sidhamakara dhvajam, because of the soil mining and the mono-culture plantation of rubber:

Since the soil mining was done on the fertile sand the medicines were lost eventually. Those places where the sand mining was done rubber is planted. There's no guarantee that for the next rain herbs and shrubs will sprout at those places. Sachi explained to the students that due to the mining of the sand the natural biodiversity of the place would be lost. (Kurissery, 2021, p.79)

Under the ruse of road extension as a public welfare and developmental project, many hills and mountains located in Kanathurkunnu and Mundakapadam have been destroyed leaving only pits. In the exotic imagination of the novelist, Kanathurkunnu, in its current state, looks "like a beautiful woman lying after removal of her breasts" (Kurissery, 2021, p.101). Since the hills and the mountains are the natural reservoirs of water, the ground water level drops significantly with their destruction, subsequently causing low water level in other sources of water also:

P.R spoke on the importance of mountains; they collect water within themselves...The well of this place must have dried up. He asked the people who gathered at that place. It was true. It's five years since the wells have dried up. (Kurissery, 2021, p.102)

Such destructive endeavours undertaken against the earth solely for making Mannida better for its people also substantiate the idea of "terraforming" (a term coined by Jack Williamson in his 1942 short story "Collision orbit"), meaning "the alteration of earth's landscape" (Pak, 2016, p.1) for human causes. The idea is perhaps best presented in Amitav Ghosh's famous non-fiction *The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis* (2021), in which Ghosh talks about how the European colonizers considered the earth as "a "frontier" to be "conquered" and "colonized"" (Ghosh, 2021, p.54).

The water shortage continues to be a severe crisis in Mannida and its surrounding areas. The father of one of Sachi's students is seen to express his disgust to Sachi that, for the first time in his life, the water in his well has dried up. The ever water-rich Akaththukavu temple pond has also gone dry. Moreover, the river water gets contaminated courtesy to the disposal of various sorts of waste into its body:

Today many of the water bodies are the place to dispose the waste and garbage. By the time we understand the importance of water, it would perish. The sewage waste and the slaughter waste is being dumped into the river. The Public Works Department has not understood that the small drains are connected to the water bodies. They deem as if they don't know about the factory waste being dumped into the river. (Kurissery, 2021, p.180)

As Sachi starts living in Mannida, he goes on experiencing the terrible state of the place marked by extremely poor air quality due to the overwhelming presence of varied poisonous gases and harmful particles emanating from the open brick furnaces situated near the river banks. Almost everybody ranging from the children to the oldies has to pay the price as they suffer from different toxic air-invited diseases like asthma, skin allergy, and intense breathing problem. The exact cause of these problems is pointed out in clear terms by Vasu Pillai, the tea-shop owner as he narrates:

When they (the brick furnace people) don't get blue mud, they mix clay with vandal. Then this foul smell emanates if you are somewhere near to it, then you will faint and fall...Vandal actually is a bad mud, which is not formed properly. This consists of soiled leaves and twigs. When it's set to fire many poisonous gases come out. (Kurissery, 2021, p.32).

V. CONCLUSION

Hari Kurissery in his eco-narrative *Manalazham* dexterously sketches a lively picture of the neo-colonial resource extractivism and its detrimental effects. The novel, in its limited space, exhibits how the extractivist economy of Mannida guides its people to nurture in them infinite greed and violence. Their extreme yearning for money gradually silences their voice of resistance turning them into spineless parasites. Despite putting up a number of resistances led by Sachi and other local activists, Mannida continues to flow in its own familiar rhythm, disregarding its internal anomalies. The unimaginable resource exploitation meted out on Mannida at the expense of its sustainable development inevitably makes it a "sacrifice zone", a place which "to their extractors, somehow doesn't[don't] count and therefore can be poisoned, drained or otherwise destroyed, for the supposed greater good of economic progress" (Klein, 2014, p.196). The novel in its own way reveals that the word 'development' is very often fraught with the hermeneutics of suspicion and offers a message that sustainable development is the only alternative in this regard.

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